

In the summer of 2018, Sergio Perello and his good dog Murguia Jim won the English National Championship. This is their story...

1 - THE BEGINNING

I've been asked to write about our story and how we got in this sheepdog trial world. I say 'we' because it's not my story, it's a story of many people and a few dogs which I've been lucky to be part of.

My name is Sergio Perello. I'm originally from a little island in the Mediterranean Sea that belongs to Spain called Mallorca. Since I was a kid, I loved dogs and have always been involved with nature, etc. When I was about 10 years old and watching a program on TV, I saw some dogs working some sheep and the only thing I remember is being glued to the TV, as my mum says. I desperately wanted one of those dogs.

I didn't know what breed they were, or what they were really doing, but I suppose that wild look on their faces and the way they were working just switched on something on me. Time went on and when I was about 22 (I think!), I was in my uncle's house and he was reading the town magazine where there were some adverts. He suddenly said, "Oh look, someone is selling some of them collie pups. If I could, I would buy one", as he had about 50 sheep at the time. And then, my memories came back, and I remembered how much I wanted one when I was a kid, so I took the phone number on the advert and went to buy one of the pups.

Unfortunately, that dog, apart from four legs, had nothing to do with a collie. She was scared of everything, but I tried my best to find someone on the island that knew something about these dogs as I didn't have a clue where to even start. Luckily, few months after that, there was a big celebration day in my town and there was going to be a demo with a man that had sheepdogs (one of the only ones in the whole island) and the only one that had any control of them (Just like in Spain, there was no tradition or any culture about sheepdogs on the island.) I arrived and watched his dogs for a bit, and when the demo finished, I went to talk to him and see if he could teach me anything.

After a few weeks, I went to his place to try the little bitch I bought but there was nothing there. Fortunately, I met Jaime there, who is now one of my best friends. He was trying to start to train sheepdogs too. Very quickly we became good friends.

I did buy a new pup which was more interested and started doing a bit more. My friend Jaime was trying to find information about these dogs and together we were trying to find ways to learn more. One day Jaime said, "I found this. Look, it's called ISDS", so he bought DVDs of trials and we just could not believe how far those dogs were going to pick up sheep... was something that we could just not understand.

Time went on and we kept training together (well... doing something!) and we heard that in the Basque country was a man that was trying to show new ways to train a dog and was bringing people from the UK to teach. He was going to give his first clinic in mainland Spain, so my friend and I quickly booked a spot each for the clinic... and for me, that is where everything began.

I used to work as a delivery man in a meat company in the island, delivering meat to hotels, restaurants etc. during the summer season. It was tricky to convince my boss to let me go to the clinic but with three months advance, I asked, and he finally said 'yes' so everything was ready to be able to go to that clinic.

The man that was giving the clinic was called Oscar Murguia. Oscar is from the Basque country in the north of Spain and today he is one of my best friends. I could even say now that he is like a big brother, but at that time, he was a serious man that didn't say a lot to me. The next morning, we started first day of the clinic. I was very nervous because I didn't want to make a mess. We did OK, but what really changed and made the clinic worth watching was the bitch that Oscar was running in the clinic. She was called Beltz, and she changed every single thing in my mind about what was possible to do with these dogs. She was giving everything, and her presence and stamina were impressive, especially when we were comparing it with our dogs. I finished that clinic with a totally different perspective about what I was looking for in a dog then and I came back home with a whole new perspective and questions that needed answers.

2 - FIRST TRIAL, HOLIDAYS IN UK, AND "MURGUIA NARA"

About a year and a half after that clinic, a new sheepdog society was starting in Spain and Spain joined the ISDS. The first trials were going to be at Oscar's place and Jaime, and I decided to give it a go. I genuinely was thinking my dog could do OK (obviously I was wrong), so I finished my job on Saturday at 12 o'clock, to catch a flight at 3 o'clock to run on Sunday first thing, and be back by Sunday night to start work on Monday. What I didn't know is that going to that trial would be the real start of everything.

I arrived in Murguia and met a man called Tom Huddleston who came from the UK to judge the trial. I went to the post and my dog crossed after 100 yards. I was devastated because of all the effort it took to be to come to the trial, but after a while we went for lunch and I was a bit more positive. I was asking Tom a lot of things as I knew that he would have a lot of information that maybe I could use to get better. All of a sudden, Tom picked up a piece of paper and wrote his address, number, email etc. on it and said, "If you want to come to the UK sometime to learn, come to my house; you are invited." I was excited about that because I never went anywhere apart from Spain before and thought that could be the best adventure ever.

Oscar came to give a clinic on the island a few months after that. By then we were very good friends and Oscar was trying to help me as he always believed in me. He and Jaime were the ones that always encouraged me. With him he brought a little hard bitch called Murguia Nara. By then I had two dogs (well, probably one between the two, but looking back, at the time they were the kind of dogs that I needed to start with), but I was a bit stuck and even though I was getting a lot more from them, it was a bit boring always having to do the same thing.

Oscar and I ended up having the conclusion that I needed something new to keep progressing and he offered this bitch (Nara) so I could train her. He said to me, "I don't know if you will manage to train her or not, but I promise you something, you will learn a lot."

It was no choice for me; I had to learn, otherwise I was not going to be able to train her. She was tough, had a problem on her left flank, she would not take sheep from a corner, etc., but I loved her. She was strong, had loads of feel, and never gave up. I had to work a lot on how to position myself to confuse her so she would go around the corners, etc., etc., long story....

It took me eight months. I used to finish work at four o'clock, go home, drive 20 miles to go to the farm to train her in the afternoons two or three times a week. As I was driving my little van, I couldn't stop thinking about what the next step was or how I could change this or that. That really kept me very focused and made me learn a lot of stuff on my own.

The following year, I was going to go to Tom Huddleston about March-April time to spend my holidays there, but before that, I was going to run Nara in the European Nursery Championship.

Oscar was going with her brother too. I was very excited about going as I thought she was running great; on whistles and about 400 yards from me. I was quite proud of the way she was running. What a trip that was....

We set off from Murguia to Holland (a 15-hour drive) with all the best feeling until we got to about the middle of France, my van had a problem in the fuel injection. After losing Oscar on the motorway and not knowing if I was going to get to the place (I didn't speak basically any English at all and definitely not French!), massive trailers passing me, and I didn't know when my van was going to quit again. It did quit about 20 times and luckily every time I found an exit, but I can promise you that was one of the worst feelings I ever had, as before that trip I had never driven anywhere in Europe.

Anyway, I finally got there and after a ticket of 500£ for fixing my van, the trial started the next morning. I was like, "I hope it goes well." (Wrong again!!) After all the trouble, I was ready for something that made me feel a bit better. We went to the post, I sent her to the right and she crossed her outrun and brought them down the field like a rocket. In the second trial, she grabbed a sheep by the neck... Just what you'd call a perfect weekend....

Even so, my view about her never changed, I still loved her and thought she was really good; I think it just being her first time out from home and my second trial ever did not help.

After all of that, we set off from Holland to the UK back to Tom's house. We spent a month and a half there with Tom and his wife, Becky; that changed everything in my mind again. Tom took me to some trials and first one we did, Nara got a third in a nursery. I was over the moon as she ran more and more like I knew she could.

We also visited farms and one of the days, I went to spend a day with Ricky Hutchinson. I didn't know Ricky before that, but Tom told me was a very good handler and had tremendous dogs, so I was quite looking forward to it. I went with Ricky to bring some sheep back home with him and he asked me to use Nara to put some sheep in some pens. The sheep came down the field but would not go in the pens, they didn't like it. I was commanding Nara everywhere and trying to be in charge of everything but nothing was happening; that's when Ricky said, "You need to let your dog be in charge, stop commanding him all the time." His bitch, Fly, came out of the car and just with the word, "Fly", she put them in. That made me realize of a lot of things again.

It was time to come home and with that came the hardest thing; Nara was going back to Oscar and I didn't really want her to. But what I didn't know was that something was coming that was going to change the whole story once again.

3 - MURGUIA JIM, PLANS TO MOVE TO THE UK

After Nara went back to Oscar, I was told that Oscar's Beltz, (Nara's mother) was mated to a dog called Curly Spot, a dog that I loved and that my friend Jaime helped Oscar to bring to Spain from Kevin Evans in Wales. Jaime told me that he had asked Oscar for two pups as charge for helping to get the dog and he was going to give me one. I saw the pups and one was this little tiny tan pup; I was having that one or none and finally managed to get that one. I named him Jim. I did not have any more dogs apart from this little pup after Nara, so for next few months I just spent time with this pup and there was just something about him. His nature was really nice and after a few times to try him on sheep, he was desperate to work. At home he was the most chilled pup, a pleasure to have around.

I started to think that I had THE dog and my desire to get better as handler and trainer was bigger than ever. I felt like if I did not leave the island I would never get better, so I decided that I was going

to try to move to the UK. You maybe think I had a plan, but no, I didn't; the only thing I knew is that I wanted to go. I spoke to Tom about it and he encouraged me to do it. My friend David Henderson found me a lambing job and that was it!! I saved money for a year, working extra hours to save as much as I could. When we set off, it was basically a van, three cases full of dreams and clothe, and a 12-month-old dog that was keen to everything but not trained at all.

I started lambing on this man's farm in Durham. He didn't have a dog really, so I ended up being the dog during that lambing, and it properly made me realize how important a dog is and how valuable it is what they do for us.

After finishing lambing, I went back to David's for a week, but I didn't know what I was going to do from there. I felt Northumberland was a bit remote, so I asked Tom if he knew anywhere around him where I could rent a house. Tom's reply after a day was, "Yes, we found one", and sent me a postcode. My surprise was when the postcode was the postcode of his house. He said he wanted me to stay there as other ways wouldn't be easy for me to have a good start, so he was going to help me get established before I moved somewhere else. Without that, I don't think I would be writing this story now. What Tom and Becky did for me is something I'll never be able to pay back.

Tom helped me as if I were his son and gave me everything I needed to have the best start. I spent the next five months at Tom's house, and he found me some work on a few farms he knew. I started to meet more people and was starting to get better with the language. That was something else I struggled with; my English was just basic vocabulary, so I used to get a headache just trying to understand people, but anyway that was good because I had to try harder.

Everything was going in the right direction apart from Jim's training. He was hard, pushy, and very, very forward which I struggled with quite a bit at the beginning as I didn't have the experience. It wasn't like he was trying to be bad; he was just overloaded with passion and he did not know how to control it.

While Jim was in training, Jaime said he would like to send his three-year-old dog, Rap, to get some working experience, plus a chance to trial him more, so he sent him over and that worked perfect for me. I did not need to push Jim in any way on his training, or better said, I could do the training I wanted without having to use him for work without being ready.

Summer came and Rap was running quite well for me and I was starting to wonder if I could place him in some trials. That looked almost impossible as there were so many good handlers that it felt like an impossible job, but that same challenge made me more keen on it. I thought, "If you can compete closer and closer with them, we may have a chance at some point", and one day Rap won two trials in one day and I think that was maybe only the second time we managed to get in the prizes. All of a sudden, we were qualified for the following English National; I could not believe it! When I set off from home, I was not even thinking about that, as it seemed so far away.

Summer season finished and Tom and Becky planned a five-month long trip to Brazil and South America. They asked if I would look after the house and dogs; just the fact that they trusted me to do that meant so much, so we did it. They left in October and the Nursery season was going to start. Jim was almost ready, but I had to concentrate 100% every time I took him out because he was not the easiest dog to run by then. He had so much forward that I struggled to handle him. After a month or two, he started to run better, won a couple of nurseries and was getting consistent, which ended up qualifying us for the English Nursery Final, the biggest trial for us by then.

At the National, I was quite nervous that day and we had a good run, but lack of experience for both of us showed on the shed and cost us. We ended up third, which was more than a dream after

spending months and months trying to get Jim to his potential. By the end of the Nursery season, Jim had changed and was starting to look like a proper Open dog; he was overtaking Rap at work, too. He showed power and confidence to do anything, and just after lambing time, in one month he won one trial, placed in a few others, and was qualified for the National too. What summer to look forward to....

4 - MOVING FROM TOM'S HOUSE, FIRST NATIONAL AND SUPREME

When Tom and Becky came back from Brazil, it was time for me to move from their home. Like I said, I'll never be able to repay them in any way for what they did for me. By then I found a few more days of work a week and I could manage with my English, so it was good timing for me. Brenda Helliwell, a sheepdog trainer that lives just ten minutes from Tom, had a room that she wanted to rent so it was very good chance for me as was just the same area and close to everything I was used to. Brenda was lovely and is still now a very good friend of mine. It was so easy to live there. Summer came again quick and the National was just there. I was very, very nervous but I learned a lot that weekend. I ran Rap the first day and he went too big on his outrun, we missed the fetch... just did not work out. On Sunday, it was time for Jim. It was a very hot day; a few dogs just gave up working.

We had a fairly good start and had good lines around the course; we missed a sheep on the cross drive but overall, we were well in before the shed. As soon as the sheep came into the ring, one of them (the one that was pulling on the course, but not too badly) started going crazy and we just couldn't do anything about it. I did not even feel it was lack of experience this time, she was just a bit crazy somehow. It took us ages to get a shed and finally we did it, but Jim was absolutely exhausted. I could see that the chances to pen were very low, but I decided to give it a try. Well, we didn't get the pen; a sheep ran off and Jim tried to get her, but she was too fast for him and he ended up gripping it. It was not a bad grip; in my view, he just could not reach her or do anything else. Something was very clear after that run for me; he would have died if I kept asking him to go. He was not going to give up, and on that day more than any other day, I had the feeling he was special.

5 - SECOND SEASON, SECOND NATIONAL

In our second season, both dogs started to be very consistent. Rap won about five more Opens, Jim the same, and I was getting a lot more confidence in them and in myself. Jim was starting to look different as he turned three years old and I felt we could do a lot better than the previous year at the National. My friend Oscar came to watch us that year and was a huge support as we walked the field together. He is a very, very good handler and basically everything I know about sheepdogs I have learned from him. We share the same ideas and we look for the same type of dogs; he has always been there and believed in me when not many people would. So, for me it was huge to have him there that day with me.

The sheep were very tricky the first day, loads of retires and DQs, but I felt that those type of sheep could suit Jim as he had the power to work them. But obviously, at the same time I was like, "I hope we don't get a bad one." As you probably all know, sometimes there is nothing you can do.

Jim went out and picked up the sheep and pretty much after that, he had a lovely run, good finish this time and he went on top!! I genuinely could not believe what was happening; me and Oscar were like WTF???? Us??? Winning??? It was special and I'll never forget that day.

On the third day, I ran Rap and it did not work out this time; the sheep won the battle against us. We were a bit short of everything, but it was still a good day as my mate Ricky Hutchison won the day with Sweep with a top class run! Suddenly, I was in a runoff with one of my best friends and I

promise you I did not give a shit if I was going to win or not; that day was going to be a party for me whatever.

The runoff was close, and Ricky won with Sweep. I was second and Michael Longton was third with Rainow Todd. If someone had told me a year before that that I was going to be runner-up to the best dog in England, I would have laughed my head off. Sweep deserved it not just because of his run, but because of his career. So, we went back home with the hat of an English team member!!! I could say that it was a dream come true, but the reality was that it wasn't even in my dreams, because I saw anything like that as being so far away.

A month later, we were going to the Supreme with the best teams from the four nations in a HUGE double gather course. The standard was very high, and we were running late on the second day. I've never been as nervous in my life as just before I sent my dog, but we had a pretty good start and started the shed with potential to be in the Supreme. I took my shed, I thought that was good and send my dog around, but I was asked to re-shed. Straight away, I thought that the run was good enough even with that, but I couldn't make another mistake, so I did the same shed again and this time they accepted it. The pen was good and the on the single Jim took a good one. Just before that, I could hear the silence and the peoples' expectation after I had to re-shed. When we did the single, there was a huge explosion of applause and that moment is definitely one of them that stays in your mind. I had the adrenaline over the roof and with that single we qualified for the Supreme Final! In the Final, I had loads of doubts because I'd never had Jim that far away from me before; it was definitely the toughest challenge we'd ever had. Jim did the best first outrun in the Final, not a bad first fetch, the look back was not good but we managed to get to the second packet. The beginning of the second fetch was good but suddenly we lost the sheep. I'm not sure what went wrong but we ended up losing most of our second fetch. We had good drives, but on the shed the sheep were very tricky. I felt the pressure of them a lot and just did not know what to do, it was too much for us. We ended up seventh, which is something that makes me incredibly proud. Ricky won, and was reserve too, with Sweep and Jock, a master class of sheepherding. We were so happy for him as we knew how much that meant to him, it was a good day.

6 - THIRD SEASON, WINNING THE ENGLISH NATIONAL

Starting the third season, Jim was one of the most consistent dogs in England and I was looking forward to the National again after the buzz of the year before. By then, Jim probably won about 20 Opens and I had all the trust in him. This time I just had Jim as Rap had been sold. We were running on the third day this time and sheep were looking better than the other two previous days. Jim went left and after a really good but tricky lift, we had a very good run which took us to the top again!! Oscar was there again, this time with his son; it was unreal, two years consecutively being in the runoff. I don't have words to describe the feeling.

This time, my friend James Doubleton and his good dog Sid, plus Tim Longton and Rootenbrook Roy were the other two in the runoff. I went first. My run was not as good as our qualifying run and we had a couple of holes, but it was all yet to be decided. Tim went next and did not have a good go, so it was all between me and James. James was a bit wide on his outrun and missed the fetch but after that, he did not lose anything else; it was class drives and finish. Like the previous year with Ricky and Sweep, it was going to be a genuinely close result again.

James had a hell of a dog and worked a lot for it, so was a bit like with Ricky the previous year; it was going to be a party whatever happened. This time it was our time and Tom Huddleston, the man who took me by the hand all the way and had since become Chairman of the Society, he was the

one who shouted our name. I was nearly in tears and I could see that Tom was too. Oscar, who bred Jim, was there; everything looked like a film where we were just a cloud of happiness.

That day is the one that I think no matter what happens, it will be stuck in my brain forever. Not just because we won, that probably is the minor detail of all of it. It's all the way we got there that made it special; doing it with my dog and sharing it with the people that were there when it mattered.

7 - END

Since then, loads have happened; Jim has pups that are all over the world, I've been to so many places judging, trialing, etc. that I never thought I was going to ever be able to go. This sheepdog world has given me the opportunity to live life at its fullest and enjoy so many things, to meet so many people and share so many things.

I'm nobody to give advice or anything like that, but if I could say something would be something like, "Don't let anyone tell you how good you can become, or how far you can reach. If I had, nothing of what I said in this story would have happened, so do it!!"

